

Ships in the Night

A Nat-Pack Party Favor

May 1995

THE HISTORY OF

THE UNITED STATES

OF AMERICA

Ships in the Night

Ships 0 -- Prologue

There were days when she didn't even think about him.

At least, that's what she told herself. Hours, maybe. Days? That was pushing it. At least be honest about it. Be honest that every now and then, something brought him to mind—a whiff of men's cologne (half the time from a corpse she was autopsying), a joke overheard that would have made him laugh, a movie on late-night TV that she'd watched too many times with him and now watched alone . . . no, better not to think about it. Because there were enough things that brought him to mind. And no matter what she tried, no matter how many defenses she brought to bear, no matter how many ways she found to keep herself busy, there was always something to remind her of him. That he'd been there, once.

And wasn't there any more.

That's why Natalie's breath caught in her throat as she walked to her car. She stopped, aware of the light breeze of the spring evening, the weight of her coat over her arm with her handbag beneath it. Her shoulders tensed and she held her breath, wondering if she dared turn, if she'd actually seen what she thought she'd seen.

If she *had* . . . what did it matter? He was out of her life, *they* were out of her life. It hadn't been her choice. It would never have been her choice.

So she continued walking, her heels clicking a little too quickly on the concrete walk as she hurried to her car. Once there, Natalie felt brave enough to look out the windshield.

Nothing.

It could have been a memory. Another wisp of cologne on the breeze.

But she still felt the eyes on her, watching her.

For some reason, she wasn't frightened. Smiling, she put the keys in the ignition and started the engine—no, she'd passed beyond frightened a long time ago. Fear was something that could be conquered, if faced often enough. The nuance, the cut of the clothing, the flutter of the heart, the pounding pulse . . . know the enemy and you shall overcome him.

It amused her that she'd ever been afraid.

Natalie noticed nothing unusual on the drive home, or when she entered her apartment. Sidney brushed against her legs when she entered, then went off to his own devices—even in these few years he had aged past playful leaps or such mischief as trying to shed her stockings. He had a quiet dignity, now, as he shadowed her movements. And even after a few minutes of that, she knew he would eventually give up and settle into his box, to dream of younger, friskier days. One day she'd find him there—still and quiet and cold.

Not that she was afraid. It was inevitable. And it was stupid to waste time on fearing what you couldn't change.

It was stupid to waste time

The evening was like any other—change from work clothes into sweats, make dinner, watch the evening news. Seniority meant she worked the day shifts. Oh, when they needed her or things got crazy, she'd pitch in with an odd night shift now and again, but not unless they asked. There was no point in working nights.

And nights came later in the spring. By the time the evening news had ended, twilight had gone from light purples into deep and sinister violets. The TV remained on, some woman bleating nonsense about which star was marrying/divorcing whom and why. Normally, Natalie would have changed the channel to something else, but her attention wandered. The third time she found herself checking the window and the door, she frowned and pushed herself from the couch.

There was a pad of paper on her desk. Picking up a pencil, she scrawled a few words then tore the paper from the pad. With a piece of tape, she fixed the paper to the window, writing facing out. And she couldn't help but glance outside as she unlocked the clasp.

She knew that almost anyone on the street below who saw her tape up the note would have thought she was crazy—it was a third

floor window and the fire escape was on the bedroom side. But the note wasn't for 'almost anyone.' It was for someone who *would* see the note. If they wanted to.

Her fingers on the sill, she paused, forcing herself to remember that it hadn't been her choice. She owed him nothing. She owed *them* nothing. And if she continued to look for a cure, just in case, well . . . that was her business, wasn't it?

Just in case

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Ships in the Night

Ships 1 – A Better Mousetrap

There was a knock on the door, the barest tap of knuckles against wood.

She stiffened at the sound, glancing to the note taped to the window—‘I need to see you.’ Never had that quick of a response before.

But stranger things had happened. And probably still would.

With a sigh, Natalie pushed herself up from the couch and gave her lap a light pat to brush away the dinner crumbs that still clung to her. If she’d thought he’d have answered this quickly, she would have dressed. He seemed to take her more seriously if she took the effort to make herself ‘presentable,’ while other times he barely acknowledged her presence.

She’d grown used to that. That was his way. As was not bothering to knock more than once, knowing that she’d heard him. It amused him to observe the proprieties.

Without bothering to check the peephole, she opened the door and stood to one side. LaCroix walked into the room as if he owned it, his expression that of barely concealed distaste. “You requested an audience?”

“Don’t tell me your highness has a more pressing engagement?”

She caught the sparkle in his eyes, the quirk of his lip as she walked past him and seated herself on the couch. As usual, a little defiance was more than enough to get his attention. Keeping it was another matter entirely

“Oh, you know how it is—bodies to drain, people to kill.” He shrugged lightly, then moved so quickly that he was nothing more than a blur, picking up Sydney as the cat tried to dash past him. Despite protesting yowls from Sydney, LaCroix cradled the cat in his arm and

began to scratch Sydney's head, just between his ears. "What did you want?"

Seldom was he so direct. It distracted Natalie for a moment and she forgot to watch her gaze. Her eyes locked on his—

It was only a second. She blinked and looked down, frowning, breaking away from the hold he'd tried to place on her. It was almost a game with him—if he'd wanted to force the issue, he could. He just wanted to remind her of it, that was all.

"So, you want to know if I've heard anything of Nicholas."

"That should have been obvious."

"It was. Painfully so." Another yowl from Sydney and she looked up, only to see LaCroix bend slightly to release the cat. He straightened, watching Sydney streak away. "He's still running."

There was something in the way he stood—a note of annoyance that brought a smile to her lips. "He escaped you."

"Barely." With a flick of his hand, he dismissed the matter. "An oversight." But then he seated himself in the chair opposite her own and crossed one leg over the other, resting his clasped hand on one knee. "As to your inevitable questions—he looked healthy enough. It appears that he's been . . . eating. I very much doubt he's been sleeping well. I wouldn't, in his position."

Natalie straightened with pride. LaCroix merely snarled in disgust, "Oh, please!"

"He's beaten you."

"This time." LaCroix rose from his chair and walked to the window. He peeled the tape and the note from the glass, adding, "I'm only doing it for his own good. You know that."

"He wants to be free of you—"

"He wants to be *dead*." Crumpling the note in his hand, LaCroix threw it to the floor and began to pace. "That's the ultimate state of mortality—death. Or am I wrong?"

"He wants the right to lead his own life."

"He wants to die. Which is something I can't allow. It's become something of a point of honor." Almost petulantly, LaCroix stopped and gestured toward the window. "But surely you *must* see reason—there are dangers for him out there."

Natalie shrugged. "He's a big boy—"

"He's an ex-vampire. He hasn't been mortal for 800 years. He hasn't suffered from disease, or illness, or accident or even something as insignificant as—" he held his hand flat and turned the fingernails inward.

"A hangnail?" offered Natalie.

"Yes." LaCroix pointed at her. "You've spent time with him. Can you say he's at all equipped to survive as a mortal in your world?"

Honesty made her bite back her instant response—LaCroix *was* right in that respect. Nick had been indestructible for so long that he'd forgotten how easily the magnificent mechanics of the human body could be broken beyond repair. She'd wanted to walk him back to mortality in steps but Nick, as usual, had jumped into mortality with both feet—

And out of her life at the same time.

"You see? You see?" LaCroix shook his head and sighed, then turned his back to her and leaned his hand against the wall. "*I do* wish you'd help me to bring him home. It's only a matter of time before something happens to him. And it may very well be beyond my power to save him. It would be your fault, you know."

"Bullshit."

"I wonder if finding his body on your work roster one morning will make you more erudite." LaCroix turned his head, giving her an inquisitive glance. "No expletive in reply? Well, Doctor, this conversation bores me. So if you've no information of your own to trade, I'll be on my way—?" He paused—although she knew it was half for dramatic effect and half because he knew that she *did* have something for him.

"There was a phone call . . ."

Her words were halting, slow. Natalie bit her lip and looked down at the floor, feeling like a complete and utter traitor. Yes, she'd agreed to this exchange of information with LaCroix because it was the only way to keep tabs on Nick, to find out what was happening to him, where he was. Nick would be furious if he knew . . . and maybe he *did*. Maybe that's why he hadn't contacted her. Could she blame him? She had only LaCroix's word that he'd tell her what he knew.

Just as he only had her word that she was telling him the truth.

"Did he speak to you?"

The sudden interest in his voice startled her. Natalie looked him in the eye—instantly regretting the move. But this time LaCroix made no attempt to control her. He merely tilted his head, as if acknowledging that he wasn't interested in that part of the game at the moment.

It was almost enough to knock her speechless, this passionate interest in whether Nick spoke to her and what he might have said. But she managed to shake her head. "I'm not even certain it was him. The phone rang,; I answered. There was no one on the line."

"A prank. An obscene caller, heaven forbid?"

She let that slide, instead concentrating on that brief instant. Had he whispered her name? Had she dreamed it? "There was no one on the line. Then I got a dial tone."

LaCroix indicated the phone on the table beside the couch with a gesture of two fingers. "Here, or at your place of work."

"Work."

"Which no doubt has the capability to track calls, of one sort or another."

"It was an outside call," said Natalie, again taking the chance and meeting his gaze. "I could tell from the ring."

"It would be very like him," admitted LaCroix thoughtfully. "Our Nicholas has such a romantic streak. He only wanted to hear your dulcet voice to ease his heavy heart—"

"Give me a break."

"Gladly." Suddenly, he was sitting beside her. Natalie would have jumped out of her skin if it were possible. It was bad enough that her flesh crawled as LaCroix took her hand. "You spend far too much time alone, Doctor. Your color isn't at all healthy. You should get out more. Find yourself a young man. I'm certain Janette could find you a likely mortal candidate from her clientele—she *does* tend to cull the best from the herd."

"Thanks, but no thanks. I'm not interested in Janette's left-overs." Natalie snatched her hand away from him and struggled to her feet. Oddly enough, LaCroix let her walk away.

"Still pining for Nicholas, then? How faithful you are! I wonder if you can count on him to be the same. He's always been a bit of a lad, has our Nicholas." He clasped his hands together, as if in ecstasy. "Oh, if you had only seen the beautifies that flocked to him, like moths to a flame! Half the time I didn't know how he chose one from among them. And I'm quite sure there were occasions where he didn't settle for *only* one."

They'd moved to another part of the game. Natalie kept telling herself that, reminded herself not to rise to his taunts and jibes. It would only please him. And she wanted to do anything *but* please LaCroix. "I wouldn't know about that."

"No. I suppose you wouldn't." LaCroix rose and walked toward her. "So you live your solitary, boring little life, waiting desperately for him to return. Afraid, no doubt, to strike up anything like a friendship with anyone of the opposite gender because Nicholas might see you."

Natalie smiled bitterly. "How could he, when you're always watching over me?"

"Only time and again—I give you your privacy," said LaCroix, mocking gallantry with a bow. "I've left you to your own devices for some time, now. But you're trying to change my train of thought. Does it bother you, how easily he leaps to conclusions? And we both know how about his misplaced sense of chivalry. It would be the matter of a moment for him to decide that he wasn't good enough for you, or that you'd found happiness with another and he didn't want to stand in your way." Again, he took her hand in his, tracing the lines in her palm with his fingernail. "Such a long life-line, Doctor. But such a solitary one."

The phone rang and she jumped. Natalie moved to answer it, but LaCroix held tightly to her hand and pulled her against him. "Do you think that might be Nicholas?" he asked, whispering, his voice containing a false note of horror.

Another ring.

"Shall I answer it?" asked LaCroix, his voice suddenly far more cultured and refined. "I'll pretend to be your butler." He took a step toward the phone, still holding her hand.

Another ring.

"No!" said Natalie quickly, gripping his hand with all her might.

If he'd wanted to move, he could and would have. But LaCroix froze, his features at first surprised, then mocking sudden understanding. "Ah, yes . . . that might just be Nicholas, mightn't it? How would he react, do you think, if I answered your phone?"

Another ring.

"Alarmed? For your safety? Or your virtue?" He swung her into his arms again and Natalie found herself being waltzed past the phone and across the room for another two rings until LaCroix stopped suddenly, leaving them the furthest distance from the phone. "He should know you're safe as houses with me."

By the next ring, Natalie was ready to scream. She desperately hoped whoever it was would hang up and *not* try again. And there was still the answering machine

Oh, God, don't let it be Nick! Don't let him do something stupid like leaving a message on her answering machine!

"Or would he be . . . jealous?"

She hadn't realized how tightly LaCroix was holding her, their bodies still pressed together from the waltz.

"Is that why he's contacted you? Does he suspect you of fraternizing with the enemy?"

As she stared into LaCroix's eyes, Natalie realized that if LaCroix was telling the truth about not having followed her recently, the wisp she'd seen from the corner of her eye as she'd left work might have been Nick. He was watching her. He was here, in Toronto. He'd called at her at work.

He was calling her *now*.

If Nick said anything on her machine, LaCroix would pick up—she couldn't stop him—

So she closed her eyes and kissed him instead.

As usual, he hadn't shut up, so she caught him with his mouth open. No fangs, thank God (once was the first *and* last time it had happened with Nick). But it being LaCroix was enough to deal with, if she was ever going to be up to dealing with it.

Which she doubted.

In that awkward meshing of lips and tongues, she heard her answering machine go off, her recorded voice a backdrop to her desperation. And at the end, a click, as the phone went dead.

Natalie tried to break the kiss but LaCroix held her in place for a breath more, the force of his physical hold on her more than any mortal could resist. It was only as she thought she might suffocate that he released her, then leaned forward to touch his lips lightly to hers once more, as if to remind her that it had been real.

She didn't need that reminder. Her cheeks burned as she looked away, still held in his arms.

"A very *nice* distraction. My compliments, Natalie." Again, his eyes met hers—no attempt at control, but only amusement. "Ah, but I think this dance is over. Let's find you a seat."

She'd never admit to being grateful that he led her out of his embrace and back to a couch. She didn't want to be grateful to him for anything. But LaCroix moved with such confident grace that, had she been watching the scene from afar, even she wouldn't have known that the muscles in her legs had turned to jelly and that she'd broken out in a fear sweat.

LaCroix seemed not to notice. Or was pretending not to notice. He glanced over at the answering machine, then back at the phone beside the couch. "So, he *is* here."

"Why won't you leave—?" She started the sentence, then stopped when he fixed her with an expectant look.

"Oh, *do* go on," he prompted. "Or, am I supposed to guess?" A finger to his lips, LaCroix paced back and forth before her. "You know why I must have Nicholas back—I fear he'll do himself an injury. He's mine, after all. If anyone's to break him, it'll be me. As to why I can't leave you alone—?" He stopped and placed one hand on the couch arm, the other on the back of the couch, effectively trapping her. "Because, dear Natalie, whether or not you realize it, you belong to Nicholas. Which, by extension, means that you belong to me. And I'll do with you—as—I—will." He punctuated each of his final words by tapping her lightly on the nose with his index finger, then stood back to watch her reaction.

Control or not, Natalie glared at him. "Then why don't you just

get it over with? Kill me.”

“And end the game?” LaCroix clicked his tongue against his teeth. “You disappoint me. Surely you realize you’re worth much more to me alive than dead . . . or even undead.” He paused, as if giving her a chance to answer, then raised an eyebrow in surprise. “No? Then let me put it another way—you don’t *matter*. You are *nothing*. You’re simply the cheese in my mousetrap. Chasing after Nicholas tires him out—I could have taken him any number of times. But I let him escape because the longer he runs, the more weary he’ll be when he finally comes limping home . . . to you. And, to me.”

With that, LaCroix picked up her hand and lifted it lightly to his lips. “Thank you for a lovely evening, but I’m afraid I have pressing business elsewhere. We *must* do this again. Preferably, after Nicholas returns to the fold . . . and his senses.”

She didn’t move. Natalie wasn’t certain if she could have if she tried, but it really wasn’t worth the effort. She waited until LaCroix left, only dimly noting that he set the lock on her apartment door on his way out. God forbid she should have a break-in, just when all hell was about to break loose.

And it *was*. Because she wasn’t about to go down without a fight. Let LaCroix think of her as cheese—fine. That insufferable rat-bastard would have another think coming, once she teamed up with Nick.

Because she *would* team up with Nick. She’d find him first and together they’d build a better mousetrap, one strong enough to hold even a bad-ass mouse like LaCroix.

The more she thought about the idea, the more she liked it. It would be nice not being the cheese for a change.

Of course, she had to get off the couch, first

Ships in the Night

Ships 2 – While You Were Sleeping

Natalie stirred, then opened an eye. The room was in complete and utter darkness.

It wasn't unusual for her to fall asleep on the couch while the television droned on in the background.

It had been turned off. As had been the lights.

She sat up quickly and felt the blanket slide from her—even if she'd forgotten that she'd turned off the TV and lights, she would have remembered the blanket. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears, seeming louder than the Toronto Symphony's timpani section at full blast.

The couch was the safest place. So she sat there, waiting, watching

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It seemed an eternity before she noticed him. The window was open slightly, letting in a gentle breeze that billowed the curtain. The wisps of moonlight and the streetlights outside wavered with the wafting of the wind. There was only a glimpse of a pale cheek, bone white against the contrast of the darkness.

The pounding in her ears stopped as her breath caught in her throat. Another glance at the window confirmed that her note was gone. 'I need to see you,' was all it had said.

He'd read it. He'd come back.

"Nick?" she asked, her voice the barest whisper.

There was a light chuckle from the darkness, an evil sound she believed Nick incapable of making. "Try again." LaCroix stepped from the darkness and into the wan light of the window, a piece of folded paper in his hands. He unfolded it as he approached her, then handed it to her. "I happened to be passing by—who could resist such a charming invitation?"

Natalie crumpled the note in her fist and let it fall to the floor, but kept her eyes on him—she didn't trust that veneer of civilization in the least. "It wasn't meant for you."

"Wasn't it?" Seemingly affronted, he touched his hand to his collar and bowed his head. "Then I was mistaken. You should be particular about addressing your desperate missives if you're going to post them in public. You never know who might stop by."

"Well, now that you know—don't let the door hit you on the ass on the way out." She rose to her feet and faced him, pulling down her sweatshirt and mustering as much self-possession as possible, under the circumstances.

LaCroix gestured toward the window. "I'm afraid I didn't use the door"

"The window's still open."

"Yes. It is."

She stood, glaring at him. And as she watched him—the preternatural and oh-so-smug self assurance—she found herself smile.

"You find me amusing?" asked LaCroix, just a hint of annoyance in his tone of voice.

"Pitiful. You can't find Nick and you don't know what to do with yourself."

After a moment's hesitation, he turned toward the window—she saw the barest shadow of a smile on his lips. "There's some truth to that."

"Eight years and you *still* haven't found him."

"Neither have you."

Natalie froze. "But I haven't—"

She didn't finish her sentence. LaCroix nodded. "No, you haven't been hunting him." He looked at her, straightening as he did so, appraising her with his glance. "But you've been waiting for him. And, in a way, that's the same thing." He took a step toward her, clasping his hands together as he walked past her, still watching her. "He's learned to shield himself from me. I don't know who taught him—certainly not Janette, as I never taught her. But he's learned it just the same. Which means I *won't* find him, unless he wishes it."

"That'll be a cold day in hell," countered Natalie.

"Presumably." He continued to walk past her, then around her, almost forcing her to the center of the room. "But it's forced me to reappraise my methodology. Indeed, I think you may have the right way of it—wait for Nicholas to return. Less expenditure of energy. Of expense. Of time."

"Your crazy if you think he'll ever come back to you."

"And should I say the same of you?" asked LaCroix, stopping suddenly. "I am, in many ways, more kin to him than you. His father. His maker. His master."

"He doesn't need a master."

"He *thinks* he doesn't need a master," LaCroix corrected her lightly, holding up one finger to emphasize the point. Then he touched the finger to his lips and took a step backward. "I've been pondering the problem for some time, now. How to bring Nicholas back to the fold. How to make him realize his true nature. And I think you've given me the answer."

"Have I?" Natalie watched as he wandered to her bookshelf and ran his fingers along the spines, as if reading the titles.

"Yes," answered LaCroix, almost absently. "Everything I've done has cast Nicholas in the role of the prey, the hunted, when my real objective is to make him accept his true nature . . . that of the predator. Which means the hunted must become the hunter, and the hunter become the hunted." He turned toward her and folded his arms, leaning back against the bookshelf. "I'll force his hand. I'll make Nicholas *want* to find me . . . and this time I'll be the one to disappear into the mists. The longer he searches, the more desperate he becomes, the harder it will be for him not to use the gifts I've given him. By the time I allow him to find me—and I will *have* to—he'll be so in tune with his nature, so dependent on the powers at his command, that he'll never think of this nonsense of returning to mortality again."

"Haven't you forgotten something?" When LaCroix raised a suspicious eyebrow, Natalie added, "What happens when he finds you?"

"Oh, I don't have any delusions about that. We'll fight. We always do. But—" He hesitated, then smiled, "I think he might be more willing to see reason. After all, this could take some time."

"And you came here to tell me this."

"No. I came here to kill you." As Natalie's blood froze in her veins, LaCroix took a step toward her, still smiling. "As I said, I've been thinking on this matter for some time. I lacked only something to bring Nicholas in from the field, make him want to find me at any cost."

He liked to talk. It gave her a chance to move. Natalie dove for the end table where she kept the box containing Joan of Arc's cross—Nick had left it on her desk at work without so much as a good-bye. Fully expecting to be pulled aside or knocked over, he exhaled only when she flung the lid from the box . . . and found it empty.

"I've been here for some time," said LaCroix softly, suddenly beside her. He placed his hands on her shoulders, straightening her from her crouch near the box. "I recognized that—our Nicholas has always been a little too sentimental for his own good, wouldn't you say? In fact," he turned her to face him, "I wasn't all that certain about killing you when I first arrived."

She didn't faint. She didn't scream. Natalie forced herself to breathe, to glance at him and then past him, frantically trying to think of a way out of her dilemma.

"I watched you sleep . . . even tucked you in. And I thought about what Nicholas would do if I brought you across."

She'd been ignoring his words, but as they made sense, she shot him a glance. He nodded, acknowledging her wide eyes. "Yes, I've considered it. Nicholas was right, you'd be the best among us. You'd be good. Too good." He shrugged. "Ah, but what a gamble it would be. So I made a pact with myself—if you awakened and I was still here, I'd kill you. But if you were still asleep when I left, I'd return another night . . . and give you immortality." Shaking his head sadly, LaCroix raised a hand to her chin, cupping it gently. "I'm afraid you've lost the toss."

As he'd spoken, he forced her back against the wall. She was pinned between the irresistible force and an immovable object, one arm trapped between her and LaCroix and no leverage to catch him with a raised knee or a pointed elbow. He dropped his hand from her chin to her shoulder, then down to her upper arm, holding that in

place.

"I'd say I'd won," she managed, with only the slightest waver in her voice. "You know when Nick *does* find you, he'll destroy you."

"After a hundred years? Perhaps five hundred years of searching?" LaCroix shook his head, amusement in his eyes. "I think not. Actually, I'm looking forward to the novelty, being the prey instead of the predator." When she took in a deep breath to scream, he warned, "Don't. If you scream and someone comes, I *will* kill them."

The air left her lungs in short spurts as she met his eyes—she knew he'd do exactly what he said.

"Sensible," he commented, still smiling. "I'm almost sorry this didn't go the other way. Relax. Be calm. It'll be so much easier if you don't fight it."

Natalie stared into his eyes, surprised. They were almost . . . kind. LaCroix had made no attempt to force his will over hers, to mesmerize her into submission.

"A token of my esteem for you," he whispered, touching his forehead to hers. "You'll know every second of it, until the end. The least I can do, considering your sacrifice will bring a father and son together."

His hand brushed her shoulder, pushing away her hair from her neck. There was a flash of gold as LaCroix tilted back his head, and fangs and—

Pain! She was slammed back against the wall by the force of it, her pinned arm slipping free, the elbow cracking hard. Natalie's eyes closed of their own volition, wetness gathering at the corners. Her gaze fixed on the far wall, just past LaCroix's hair. She raised her freed hand to his shoulder, but she had no strength to push him away.

The pain, the vacuum on her neck as he blood was drawn from her body . . . and then a sudden weightlessness. It was almost euphoric, the edges of her line of sight going slightly gray and fuzzy. Bright lights flashed—she was seeing stars, light-headed and almost fainting.

Less almost fainting than almost dead. Sudden drop of blood pressure, patient is experiencing—how the hell does anyone know what the patient is experiencing when the patient doesn't come back from the dead to tell!

Any support from her legs disappeared. Natalie let herself be supported by LaCroix, by the hold of his arms around her. She fought to keep her eyes open, but they kept closing. There was that beautiful, warm darkness waiting for her. She was so tired. So very tired . . .

The brief pain barely registered—LaCroix had lifted his mouth from her shoulder, but still supported her in his arms, holding her tightly. “Just a bit more,” he whispered. “Not so far to fall. Only a small step into the darkness.”

A whimper rose from somewhere inside of her and she tried to shake her head, but couldn’t. She was so cold, colder than she’d ever imagined she could be, colder than the coldest day or when she’d fallen into that lake that time. Were her eyes open? She couldn’t see, there was only grayness. A force against her, holding and supporting her, but even that feeling was draining from her.

Then she felt fingers clasp around her hand—cold skin against her own cold skin. His breath brushed her ear. “Follow me. I’ll lead you there. I’ll be with you, until the end.”

There was less pain, but she moaned when he sank his teeth into her shoulder again. It seemed so long. How long was it really? Seconds? Minutes? She’d never really asked Nick how long it took—

Nick.

But this time there was no breaking glass to herald his arrival, no comforting hands to hold her, to save her. This time there was no Nick. This time, there was nothing.

And the nothing was filled with darkness.

Ships in the Night

Ships 3 – Girl Talk

The glass rattled in the window frame.

Natalie started, rising automatically from the couch at the sound. She stood, staring at the dark form at the window. Then she walked over and lifted the frame.

Janette seated herself on the ledge of the window, legs dangling outside. With her dark cloak and hair she seemed more shadow than substance. "You should clean your windowsills more often," she noted in disgust, showing Natalie a soot-tipped finger. "It's a disgrace."

"You know how it is; you tend to clean what you notice."

She stepped back as Janette slid from the windowsill and into the room, somehow managing the maneuver with the same grace she presented stalking across the floor of the Raven in six inch heels. Unfastening the clip on her cloak, she handed it to Natalie with an absent, arrogant gesture. "How *can* you live in this place?"

"It's home," said Natalie defensively, as she dropped the cape over a chair, earning a raised eyebrow reprimand from Janette. "I spend more time at work than here."

"Ah, yes. Our liberated lifestyles." With a sigh, Janette sat down on the couch and crossed her legs primly (which would have been an effort for anyone else wearing that sheathe dress). "There *are* some things I miss from the old days."

"Being treated like a slave?"

"Or a goddess." Janette shrugged. "It was all a matter of timing. And money." She gave Natalie's apartment another despairing glance. "Some things never change."

"And speaking of changes—?"

Janette gave her a sharp look. "Nicola is still one of us."

"Have you seen him?"

"I've had word of him. From a friend of a friend of a friend." She held out her hand and looked down at her fingers, as if checking her nail polish. "He's well. And sends his love."

"Does he?" asked Natalie sarcastically, as she dropped into a chair. Janette met her eyes. "Yes."

That took the wind out of her sails. It was a moment more before she could breathe. Janette, in the meanwhile, had begun to inspect the nails on her other hand.

"It was, of course, in translation. Several times over, in fact. So by the time it reached us, the message could easily have been garbled. Perhaps an inquiry about his favorite sporting team?"

"Perhaps." She straightened. "Has LaCroix found him, yet?"

"Oh, several times. And he's managed to escape." Janette yawned, covering her mouth with her hand prettily, and leaned back into the couch. "It's *so* tiresome."

"It's Nick's life we're talking about!" protested Natalie quickly.

"Um, for the first hundred years or so. But after centuries of this ceaseless fighting, it wears a bit thin. *You* try being in the middle all the time."

Natalie managed a polite, sympathetic expression. "I suppose it interrupts your beauty sleep. Or your social life."

"Nothing is *ever* allowed to interrupt my social life," said Janette forcefully. Then she shrugged and added, "Except LaCroix. It has been the three of us for too long and we've played all the parts to boredom. We need someone new."

"What about those studs I used to see you peel off yourself when you left the dance floor?"

"What about them?" Janette reached into the cleavage of her dress and produced a cigarette, then held it expectantly, as if waiting for a light. "They're bores. No style. No potential. It's important to have potential, if you're going to life for eternity."

"Did Nick have potential?" asked Natalie, pointedly ignoring the cigarette.

"Nicola had *more* than potential, from the start." With a sigh, Janette tossed the cigarette to the end table beside the couch, realizing that she was at an impasse. "Besides, I'm tired of being

surrounded by men. Another woman would make things much more interesting”

Natalie rose to her feet and walked to the window. She peeled off the note, which said simply, ‘Let’s talk,’ and tossed it onto the desk. “No. I haven’t changed my mind.”

“You broke Nicola’s heart when you refused to let him bring you across.”

“That’s not how it happened.” Natalie stood, looking out the window.

“That’s not how I heard it.” Suddenly, Janette was beside her, one hand on her shoulder, looking out into the darkness. “And it wasn’t as if you hadn’t been interested before . . . ?”

“Oh, for God’s sake, the *world* was coming to an end.” Natalie wrenched away from Janette’s grip and fell back into the chair. “I went a little crazy. Everybody did.”

Janette placed one hand on the window frame, posing. “I didn’t.”

“You’re not ‘everybody.’”

“That’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me,” noted Janette, with a cheery smile. “And just for that—” she walked over to Natalie’s chair and ran her finger along the arm, “I’ll tell you a secret—Nicola is coming back.”

Natalie tensed, tried not to show it, and knew she never should have bothered from the way Janette flounced back to the couch, wearing a satisfied smile. “I suppose you heard *that* from a friend of a friend, of an etc.”

“Actually, no. I . . . sensed it.” Janette shrugged again. “Sometimes I know Nicola’s mind before he does himself.” Shaking her head, she glanced toward the window. “As usual, his timing is impeccable. I was just thinking of returning to Paris again. It’s been some time since I was there for more than a visit.”

“You miss it.”

“It’s home.” With a wave, she dismissed the thought. “Anywhere is home, if Nicola is there. But Paris will always be . . . Paris.” She glanced at Natalie and touched a finger to her lips thoughtfully. “Does it hurt?”

After several visits from Janette, Natalie knew enough to ask, “Does *what* hurt?” having become accustomed to sudden shifts of topic during conversations.

“Those . . . wrinkles.” She gestured toward her eyes, frowning. “Do they hurt?”

“No.” Fighting down the urge to rub her eyes, Natalie placed her hands squarely on either side of the arms of the chair. “Wrinkles are the least painful things about mortality.”

“But they’re *so* unsightly.” Janette rose to her feet and held out her hand, in the direction of her cloak. “I still can’t fathom Nicola’s fascination with mortality.”

Natalie rose as well and collected Janette’s cloak. “You should try it. You might like it.”

Janette almost tore the cloak from Natalie’s hands and flung it around her in annoyance. “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t insult me.”

“My apologies.”

“Of course.” Janette paused at the window, then turned. “You have so little time, yet you still wait for him. Is he really worth it?”

Natalie swallowed, then said softly, “You tell me.”

There was an instant when Janette looked away—the mask fell then, as it so seldom did. Natalie had only seen Janette in an unguarded moment once or twice before. “Yes. I think so,” she answered, after a pause. “You know, he’ll never choose between us unless we force the issue.”

“I know.”

“Perhaps—perhaps I would do better in Paris after all, for a time. He will have you, here.” Janette met Natalie’s eyes and lifted her hand, the fingers stopping inches from her face, as if to touch the slight wrinkles at the corner of her eyes, then her hand returned to her side. “A mortal life span is not such a long time to wait, when you have eternity.”

It was both a concession and a reaffirmation of what they both knew—Janette could afford the luxury of time, while Natalie could not. Had she heard the same words in other circumstances, Natalie might have thought Janette was mocking her, needling her. But not now.

“He might not choose me.”

Janette merely smiled softly. “He will, *cher*. He will.” Then she leaned forward and kissed each of Natalie’s cheeks lightly, pausing only long enough to whisper, “Make him happy, Natalie. For as long as you may, give my Nicola some happiness that I cannot.”

Janette left as quickly as she’d arrived, slipping out the window and disappearing into the darkness. For her own part, Natalie closed the window and locked it. Walking past the desk, she picked up the note she’d pasted to the window and tossed it into the wastepaper basket on her way to her bedroom.

Nick was coming home.

And, whether he knew it or not, he was all hers.

— —

Ships in the Night

Ships 4 – Cold and Colder

“Here you are, baby, a nice bowl of—”

“Nat?”

She dropped the tuna treat. It never hit the ground because Nick caught it seconds after it left her hands. He placed the bowl on the floor, which was immediately obscured by a very hungry Sydney. Then he straightened, shoved his hands in the pockets of his jacket, and smiled. “Hi.”

“Hi,” she answered, almost numbly.

The window behind him was open, the note she’d left was lying crumpled on the desk. She forced herself to walk past him, to close the window, somehow taking in just how pale he was. He looked . . . different. She didn’t quite know what it was, but there *was* something

. . . .

This wasn’t the reunion she’d envisioned—turning, she stared at him, realizing that he felt as awkward as she. Probably *moreso*, since it was her place. And *she* hadn’t walked out on *him* without so much as a good-bye five years ago.

Which was why she wasn’t going to make it any easier for him.

Nick looked around as he walked past her. “The place looks about the same.”

“So do you.”

“I think that’s supposed to be my line.” He shot her a grin over his shoulder—too quick, that grin. Too forced. But then he turned and walked back to her, placing a hand on either shoulder and holding her at arm’s length for inspection. “You look great.”

“I look like I am, five years older and grubby as hell.”

“Five years? Really?” He shook his head slightly, then reached out with a finger to touch the tip of her nose. “Naw—you must be

wrong. You don't look a day over twenty-nine."

"Liar." There was too much affection in the word. She fell into the hug without thinking, let his arms meet around her, and rested her head on his shoulder. "I can't believe you're back."

"Neither can I."

She turned her head to meet his eyes, then reached up a hand to touch his cheek. Frowning, she rested the back of her hand against his face—his skin was cold.

"What?" asked Nick, suspiciously.

"You're cold. Colder than you used to be."

He smiled—that charming half-smile—and caught her hand in his own. "No. I'm not. Forgotten me so soon?"

"Don't flatter yourself." Natalie broke away, sat down on the couch and patted the spot beside her. "Well, come on. Tell me all about it."

Nick hesitated before sitting beside her, but then sat, facing the room rather than her. "There's not much to tell—"

"Not much to—?" Natalie picked up a small pillow from the couch and smacked him with it. "You walk out of here five years ago without even a good-bye and there's not much to tell?"

He took the pillow from her and tossed it across the room, smiling slightly. "I guess I owe you an explanation."

"That and a hell of a lot more," she warned. She watched him as he looked away—he *hadn't* changed. If anything, he looked even younger than she remembered. And . . . she couldn't read him, couldn't tell what he was thinking. He'd gotten better at hiding behind that mask of his.

"It was time to go. There were too many questions being asked. And—" Nick gave her a quick glance, "there was you."

Her heart sped up just a bit. Natalie put on a brave smile and lightly touched her hand to her chest, asking, "*Moi?*"

He grinned at that, then looked away again. "I couldn't stop thinking about you."

That wasn't news—more of a confirmation of what she'd suspected. Natalie looked down at her hands, not for the first time wondering whether she really *had* driven him away. "Just couldn't

handle those protein shakes any more, could you?"

His hand cupped her chin, lifting her face to meet his eyes—God, his skin *was* cold. "What I couldn't handle was watching you die Hour by hour, day by day. Being so close to you and not being able to tell you exactly how I felt, how much I wanted—"

"You could have *said* something," she whispered, her voice suddenly hoarse when faced by those earnest blue eyes.

"And not acted on it? This—" Nick leaned forward, kissing her lightly, quickly, "would have lead to this—"

Another kiss, but this time he meant it. Her arms went around him automatically and she held him tightly, taking advantage of the moment. They hadn't shared many kisses like that and she wanted to remember each and every one. She forgot to breathe, forgot to think, forgot everything except that Nick was back and in her arms.

Until he pulled back quickly. Natalie opened her eyes to find that his own had gone gold. He smiled sadly, showing her his fangs. "Which would have meant this."

Natalie couldn't breathe—not at first. There was still something different about him. "We knew the risks. We could have worked with the limitations."

He lifted his hand to her face, caressing her cheek. "I couldn't have."

She placed her hand over his. "I would have trusted you."

"Yes. I know. And you would have been dead. *That's* why I left." Nick rose to his feet and walked to the window. He stood there, looking out into the darkness.

Natalie honored that silence for a moment, then cleared her throat and asked, "Did LaCroix . . . ?"

She saw the edge of a bitter smile on his features. "No. I told him where I was going before I left. And Janette. That's all he really wanted—part of it. Some consideration. He was right, I owed him that. He made me."

Too many shocks, too much to digest all at once. Some part of Natalie grew red hot and angry when she realized exactly what he'd said—LaCroix had known where Nick had gone, but she couldn't be trusted with that information? With even knowing if he were alive or

dead?

And then that anger was chilled by the way Nick said the name of his master. In the past it had always been with anger, disgust, despair, fear . . . but there was an eerie acceptance to his tone. Almost . . . affection?

"What happened?" she asked, the chill stealing through her blood and bones as he stood by the window, so silent and still.

"I thought I could end it. I thought I could—" He lowered his chin to his chest for a moment. "But I couldn't. I didn't want to die, Nat. Does that make me a coward?"

She'd risen from the couch by the end of his first sentence and was at his side by the time he asked the question. She wrapped her arms around his waist from behind and leaned her head on his shoulder. "It makes you *alive*."

"But I'm not alive. I'm a vampire."

The way he said it, the absolute acceptance of the fact, made her colder still. Releasing him, she stepped back . . . and saw him straighten. She knew then what was different about him. "You're drinking human blood again."

"Yes."

There was no guilt to the admission, no soul-rending sadness. It was a simple statement of fact. It meant nothing to him.

"I . . . see." For an instant, she didn't quite know what to do. Deciding that to blunder on would be the best of all options, she walked back to the couch, saying, "Well, it isn't as if you haven't fallen off the wagon before—hard. You could—"

"I've given it up."

Something tightened in her throat. Natalie stopped where she stood, unable to look at him, her back toward him. "Given *what* up?" she asked sharply.

"Everything. The cow blood, being mortal—it's nonsense. LaCroix was right; I was a fool for wasting so much time with it."

Of all the words he'd spoken, there were only three that could strike her that deeply—'LaCroix was right.' "Fine," she said, steeling herself. With her hands clasped together, she turned to face him. "Well, you don't need me any more. So maybe you'd better leave."

Good luck with your new life, happy blood-guzzling, and—”

Suddenly he was before her, one hand on her shoulder, the other touching her face again. “*I do* need you,” he said softly, touching his lips to her forehead. “That’s why I’m here.”

She was suddenly afraid to look into his eyes, to see what she might find there. “You haven’t . . . killed, have you?”

“No—”

Her heart started beating again.

“Not yet.”

Absolute, dead and complete stop. Natalie looked up at him.

His eyes were shifting from blue to gold. “*I do* need you,” he whispered, kissing her cheek, her lips. “*I love* you. I can’t watch you die, Nat—not like all the others.”

He’d said it. He’d said that he loved her.

But that ‘all the others’ bit didn’t sit very well . . .

Natalie raised her hands to push him back, but he grabbed her wrists with one hand, kissing the inside of one wrist lightly as he propelled them both backward, seated them on the couch. “Nick—no!” She took a breath in between kisses and struggled again, trying to push him away. “I don’t want this. Don’t—!”

But then he covered her lips again, kissed her honestly and deeply—and she met that kiss with just as much intensity. When they parted, she was nearly hyperventilating.

He smiled, released one of her hands and brought it to his lips, kissing the knuckles of her fingers. “Tell me you don’t want me,” he said hoarsely.

“It’s not—I don’t—” Natalie tried to pull her hand away, but his grip was too strong. Frowning, she glared at him. “I don’t want you like *this*.”

“*This* is what I am,” Nick replied evenly. “If you want me, this is the only way you can have me, the only way we can be together.”

Again, he kissed her, leaving her lips to trail kisses down her neck, then returning again to take the breath from her. He released her wrists and even thought she tried to pull away, one of his hands slid beneath her sweatshirt. She felt her bra tear and then his hand was cupping her breast.

"Tell me you don't want me," he whispered in her ear. "You'll never see me again. Tell me you don't want me and I'll leave."

"I—I—" She was dizzy, desperate, and completely at a loss. Natalie tried pushing him away and then found her arms wrapping around his neck, drawing him closer. Her flesh felt fever hot against his own.

"Tell me you don't want me"

There was no choice at the time, at that place, in his arms. She couldn't work up the effort needed for a lie.

"I . . . want you," she admitted, her voice low and hoarse. "I want you, Nick. But not—"

Another kiss swallowed the rest of her sentence. She thought she'd never breathe again, or had forgotten how. And barely had his lips left hers than she felt them against the soft skin of her neck.

There was an instant of pain . . . and then the cold grew colder still.

Ships in the Night

Ships 5 – Begin Again

There was a knock on the door.

Natalie glanced on the note she'd left taped to the window, then crossed the room and walked out to the hall. She peered through the peephole, her hands already disengaging the locks as a matter of course—but then she froze.

It was Nick.

The locks wouldn't unhook quickly enough and one caught in her haste. "Come on, come on!" she snarled at the thing, furious. When it finally snapped out of its socket, she flung open the door.

He was tan—tan?—and more than a little road worn. Nick gave her a slight smile in greeting, a hurried, "Nat—hi," and a kiss on the cheek as he walked past her and into her apartment.

Stunned, she stood beside the open door a moment, then fury kicked in and it took all the will she had not to slam it. Natalie stalked after him, as he entered her living room and then fell wearily onto her couch.

"That's right," she said sharply, "just make yourself at home. Forget the fact that you walked out on me five years ago and I haven't heard word one, since. So long as we're at it, forget the fact that you've come back across and didn't even send me a card—"

The expression on his face was pitiful. He seemed on the verge of tears. "Nat—please! I need your help. I've—I don't have anywhere else to go"

Her anger melted at the heart-felt entreaty. She sat beside him quickly. For a moment she could only look at him, matching her memory to reality.

He *was* mortal, with sun-tanned skinned and rosy cheeks. She placed the back of her hand to his cheek—his skin was warm.

Nick caught her hand, held it against his cheek. "I've missed

you.”

“And that’s why you’ve never even so much as phoned?”

“I thought it would be too dangerous. For either of us.” Nick placed his hands to either side of his head, running them through his hair. “I’ve been a fool. I was wrong. Wrong about everything.”

Natalie placed a hand on his shoulder and was rewarded with a slight smile. “How did *this* happen?”

“Half-luck Half-accident.” He shrugged, then looked over at her. “You were right . . . it was the blood that kept me from being brought back. The Japanese developed an artificial blood—almost the real thing.”

“But half the calories?”

He smiled again—it felt so good to see him smile. “I found an old friend there—he was still working on a cure. It involved the artificial blood. I don’t know the specifics—”

“But you’re going to find out and tell me, *right*?”

His smile faded and he took her hand, before looking away. “He’s dead. They killed him.”

Natalie swallowed at the implications of the comment. Then she cleared her throat. “Notes? Records? Experiment logs?”

“Destroyed.” He held her hand in his own. “But he cured me. That’s why they killed him. Because he cured me.”

“I’m sorry.” She knew the extent of his guilt, how he blamed himself for everything. Natalie leaned her head on his shoulder, knowing that this was one burden she couldn’t take from him. “Thank God you escaped.”

“No. I didn’t.” Nick glanced at her, eyes filled with sadness, then away. “They let me go.”

“They *let* you—?” Natalie tried to wrap her mind around the concept. “Did LaCroix—?”

“He was there. So was Janette. They’re the only reason I wasn’t destroyed on the spot.” Turning toward her, Nick peeled down the collar of his leather jacket, then the shirt beneath.

Something inside Natalie twisted at the sight of those red scars—three sets, perfectly aligned. They were recent. “He bit you.”

“He tried to bring me back across. That’s why the Enforcers left

me along. They had no idea that—”

His voice faltered and he looked away again, wincing only slightly as Natalie touched the red scars with the tips of her fingers. “What?”

“That it wouldn’t take.” Nick took her hand away from the marks on his neck and held it again, grasping it like a life-line. “He almost killed me . . . but he couldn’t bring me across. Janette realized what was happening. If she hadn’t gotten me a transfusion, I would have died. LaCroix . . . my blood nearly incapacitated him.”

Natalie licked her lips. “But, he recovered?”

“Yes. I did, too . . . eventually.” Nick wrapped both of his hands around hers and smiled faintly. “I wanted to contact you, but they kept me prisoner. Until I was strong enough to try again.”

There were lines on his face, the strain of the events evident in the tone of his voice. Natalie brushed his hair back and placed her other palm flat against his cheek. “I assume LaCroix tried again.”

“No, he thought Janette should try. But they learned from their first mistake—they had a doctor on hand, just in case. He had to resuscitate me.”

His words ended in the slightly of giggles, as if the thought amused him. Natalie felt a chill go through her at the sound. Looking down at his neck, she placed her hand over the marks again and felt him shiver. “But they tried one more time.”

“LaCroix thought that they were too close to me. He found another vampire—” Nick swallowed and met her eyes. “It didn’t work.”

“Obviously.” She freed her hand from his and wrapped her arms around him. “But this means you’re free! They can’t bring you across again.” She paused and looked sideways, trying to meet his eyes—God, he looked tired. “Are they after you? You’re on the run?”

“No. Actually—” Nick cleared his throat and straightened somewhat. “They’ve cut me off. I can’t find them. LaCroix, Janette . . . any of them. I’ve known some of them for two hundred—three hundred years, or longer. But they’ve all shut me out. I’m a pariah.” He laughed lightly, still unable to meet her eyes. “LaCroix spelled it out for me—as long as I’m quiet and don’t make too much fuss, the Enforcers won’t bother me. But as far as any of them are concerned, I don’t exist. *I never existed.*”

"I can only guess at how much it hurts." She tried a comforting smile when he looked at her. "But it won't matter. You're free. Nick, you can finally live your own life. You're *mortal*!"

He touched his forehead to hers and wrapped his arms around her. "I know. That's why I need your help."

Natalie gave him a quick kiss, then smiled. "Now, see, this is where I can really help—because I know mortal like the back of my hand. Pretty soon we'll have you swilling beer, crunching chips, and screaming at the games on television like most of the other, mortal men your age. And there are a few other things that—"

"Nat, I want you to help me back across."

She wasn't certain she heard him correctly. Her arms fell from him and she straightened, a half-smile on her lips. "My hearing must be going, because I just thought I heard you say—"

"I want to find a way back across."

"Yeah. That." She could do nothing more than meet his eyes at that sudden pronouncement, her insides churning.

"I can't live like this. I can't . . . exist like this." Rising to his feet, he tucked his hands in his jacket pockets and walked away from her. "I'm dying. I can feel it. Every second of every minute of every day. By inches."

"Welcome to mortality, Nick," said Natalie sharply. "That's what life is, Nick. You've got a choice—you either concentrate on the living or you concentrate on the dying."

"I want to concentrate on the living. I *do*. But . . . I can't." He raised his hand to his forehead, as if he had a headache. "The vampire's gone. Most of it. But there's still enough left . . . it's like everything's in sharp focus. Over-focused. It's too intense. I can't take it all in. And no matter where I look—" he met her eyes, "—No matter what I see, it's all dead. Everything is dead or dying. Even you."

She forced herself to push back the anger at this change in his, tried to imagine what he was explaining, how he was viewing the world. And Natalie managed to dredge up enough sympathy to keep from walking over, slapping him in the face, and screaming at him to leave her apartment *and* her life. Slowly, she rose from the couch and walked over to him. "It's still there, isn't it?" she asked softly. "Did

you think being mortal would make it all go away, Nick? Because I never promised that. You knew that was part of the package. Just because you're mortal doesn't erase the past eight-hundred years."

He lowered his head at her words and she saw that she was partially right—it wasn't all that he thought it would be and he was looking for a safe way out. But if that was only part of it, if he was really seeing the world without hope, without anything but consumed by entropy and decay "It must be driving you mad," she whispered.

There was the slightest edge to his smile as he met her eyes. "It's not that far a trip. Not after the months they held me prisoner, trying something, *anything*"

His voice broke. She held him in her arms, wanting desperately to comfort him, to tell him that everything would be all right.

"Help me, Nat," he whispered. "Please, help me."

Natalie pulled back from him slightly and then hung her head. "Can we get some of this artificial blood? How expensive is it?"

"Money's not a problem. LaCroix took care of that, at least. I've got papers and more than a dozen Swiss bank accounts. Whatever you need—you'll have it."

She looked up quickly, lips parting to tell him exactly what she *did* need—but she stopped herself, saying, "He won't interfere?"

"No." Nick shook his head, a half-smile on his lips. "In fact, once the dust clears, he'll probably want to help."

"I don't want his help. I want—"

He kissed her. No preamble or forethought or warning. Just there and then, for what it was worth.

It was worth a lot.

When the kiss ended and their lips and mouths belonged to themselves again, Natalie rested her head against his shoulder, content to feel his arms around her, to be held by him. "I think," she said softly, "I'm beginning to understand how Janette feels. You're absolutely hopeless, Nick. Did you know that?"

"That's why I need you. You're my hope."

It tore at her, the thought of what she'd be in for—working to find a way to make him what he once was, the very thing that had kept him from her before. If she had any sense at all she'd tell him to

hit the road, to look elsewhere for his help.

Good sense had left her the moment he'd sat up on her lap table, a not-so-corpse with blue eyes and a desperately sad heart. She couldn't refuse him this. She couldn't refuse him anything. So she'd help him and hold him and accept the fact that she had him for a while, at least.

Because it was better than not having him at all

Ships in the Night

Ships 6 – Warm Wishes

The noise startled her out of her cat nap. Natalie sat up on the couch and shook her head, her gaze fixing on the television screen, which was showing some evening drama's version of a gun-battle in progress. Had that been it, then? Just some blanks fired on a sound stage?

But the rapping came again, from her door. With a sigh, she rose to her feet and checked the location of her purse—still early enough for the neighborhood kids to be selling candy for their latest band or debating team trip, or whatever they did. It was only by happenstance that her gaze traveled to the note pasted to the window.

It was still there. Undisturbed.

The rapping sounded again and Sydney stirred in his basket. "Don't bother getting up, I'll get it," she murmured in passing, reaching down to run her hand along the cat's fur. She grabbed her purse on the way to the door as the rapping began again, more insistent this time.

"For God's sake, use the bell, that's what it's for—"

Her words trailed off as she glanced through the peephole, fully expecting to see some shy skinny girl in a band uniform, or an awkward knock-kneed boy in hockey togs. She saw neither.

She saw Nick.

Her purse fell from her hand and onto the floor, but the thump of it hitting never registered. Instead, that same hand rose to her throat, touching the pulse there lightly. Some part of her brain counted her heartbeat—way too fast—while another part tried to register the presence outside the door.

It *was* him. A hand brushed through his hair nervously and he took a step back from the door, glancing down the hall—she could almost see the calculation on his face as he tried to determine that he *did* have the right apartment.

He was back. He'd left . . . and he was back.

He'd *left*

The thought set her heart still for a skipped beat. Be cool. Be calm. He'd left *her*, after all. If he was back, it was because he needed something. He was going to use her, just like she'd seen him use Janette. Now she was the mortal counterpart. When he needed something, he expected that he could show up and—

She wouldn't be having any of that. Taking a step back, Nat opened the door with as composed and reserved an expression as she could muster, fighting back the anger and the joy it had so recently supplanted and which threatened to bubble out anyway. The words were on the tip of her tongue—telling him to take a long walk off a short coffin at sunrise.

She wasn't prepared for the sudden light in his eyes when he caught sight of her. For the half-whispered, "Nat?" as his chin raised slightly in just that way he'd always had, when he couldn't believe that something good had happened to him, like a child who knew he'd been naughty and yet still found a present beneath the tree on Christmas morning. For the way his arms moved around her, the rough stubble of his cheek scratching her face as he hugged her hard, as if afraid she'd vanish in a puff of smoke.

So much for being cool and aloof

"Thank God I found you," his whispered. "Thank God! So long"

"Eight years," she managed, barely being given room to draw breath and, in doing so, inhaling the scent of his aftershave, and sweat, and old leather.

"Too long."

There were light kisses on her cheek, one hand returning as his fingers touched her lips, proving to himself that they were still there before he touched them gently with his own. The other hand raised to her neck and was tangled in her hair. Natalie hung onto him for dear life, the warmth and closeness of him almost smothering her.

The *warmth* of him?

It was no more than a strangled sound—words weren't quite possible. He drew back in alarm, eyes darting up and to one side,

then the other. A turn of his head and he checked his flank, as if watching for an enemy. But then Nick looked back at her, freeing his hand from her hair, pushing away from her as if he'd hurt her, squeezed her too hard. While her eyes were still wide with surprise, her heart beating too fast from her thoroughly unsupported—and God let it be *true*!—conclusion, he ducked his head almost shyly. “I’m sorry. I should have called—“

It didn’t matter. She took his face in her hands, needing to see his eyes, to hear it from him. “You’re . . . back?” she whispered, half-afraid of the answer he might give and yet half-praying that it might be as she suspected. “You’re *really* back?”

“Yes.” There was the barest heartbeat between them in the stillness, *his* heartbeat. “I’m back.”

There was such joy in his eyes and in his smile. Natalie took her hands from his face almost in wonder, having felt the warmth of them. As if on impulse, to confirm his pronouncement, he leaned forward and gave her a quick peck on the lips.

Warm skin. Warm lips. Warm hands. Warm arms around her in an embrace. She leaned against his chest and stole a moment to listen to his heart beating as his kisses lingered at the line of his hair and his ear. It was true. Nick was mortal.

Sense returned and, with it, questions. Natalie pushed back from his hold, forced her hands down to her sides though they ached to touch him, to prove to her that his warmth was no dream. “How?”

“Does it matter?” A motion in the hall caught his attention and he stiffened, turning his back toward Natalie as if shielding her—

But it was only one of her neighbors. Nick raised his hand in a half-hearted gesture and muttered, “Hi,” with the grin of an embarrassed schoolboy. The charming look disappeared as he turned toward her again and said, “Maybe I should come inside, before your neighbors get a free show?”

“Too late.” Grabbing hold of his shirt collar, Natalie dragged him into her apartment and shut the door behind him. Without the light from the hall behind him, she could see him clearly.

He hadn’t aged. Not much. While she

Eight years.

He sniffed slightly, rubbing his finger beneath his nose as he stood right where she'd placed him, against the wall beside the door. Much as she wanted to run into his arms, to feel the warmth of him again, his hand in her hair, Natalie also stayed right here she was, with that safe, solid door beneath her hands.

"What's the catch?"

Nick raised his hands and shrugged. "There's no—"

He was lying. Thank God she could still catch him at it. Folding her arms, Natalie raised an eyebrow and waited.

Nick sputtered for a moment more, then fell silent. He wandered into her living room, the sudden joy and strength and surety gone from him. In the dim light, she saw a weariness engulf him as he settled himself on her couch, almost falling into it. "I'm on the run."

"From LaCroix."

He winced at the name, looked down at the floor. "Yes."

"For how long?"

"Four years."

Four years. Natalie paced in front of him, walked to the window where her note was still taped in place. She could read the words 'we need to talk' backward as they were and half-lit from the moonlight outside. "Four years?"

It almost surprised her that she'd said it aloud. Somehow, some of her anger and dismay crept into the tone of her voice. When she looked back at him for an explanation, he held his hands clasped together between his knees, but met her eyes with a steady, worried gaze.

"He was watching you."

"LaCroix." She bit her tongue as he winced again and turned his head away. Reminding herself that you need only mention the devil to make him appear, she decided to avoid that word for the moment. "Where is he now? Do you know?"

"Montreal. He thinks I'm there."

"And you know this for certain?" On a whim, she turned out the light near the window and crumpled the note after ripping it from the glass. No sense advertising their presence.

"Janette said—"

"Janette?"

Nick rose to his feet and faced her, catching her hands to hold her in place. She dared a look at his face and found his expression very hard and cold. "We've had two run-ins. I barely escaped with my life the second time."

"He wants to bring you back across." For some reason, her fingers drifted to his neck, as if to prove to herself that he was what he said his was, that there were no tell-tale vampire wounds made by . . . anyone.

"He wants me dead. This last time, he tried to kill me. Janette wants me back—she doesn't want me dead." Releasing her hands, Nick took a step away, turning his back to her. "No, this is wrong. I can't ask you to do this."

"Ask me to do . . . what?"

Her hand had moved to his shoulder. He placed his own hand over hers, but wouldn't turn to face her. "This last time, it was too close. I was . . . afraid. And I thought that all I wanted was to see you again, before it happened. To tell you that I'd found the cure. To tell you—"

His fingers tightened around hers, the pressure fierce but not threatening to shatter bones. She clutched his hand just as tightly. "To tell me—?" she prompted, damning that half-catch in her voice even as the words tumbled out.

"He said he'd been watching you. That he'd kill you."

Natalie released him and turned away, her hands crushing the paper message as she walked back to the window. "This evening, I felt someone . . . watching me. I thought it might be you."

"Janette." When she raised her head to look at him, he nodded slightly. "I didn't know if he'd taken you, controlled you." And when that didn't fly, having the lie written all over it, he took a step toward her. "I didn't know how to approach you. What to say. I left so quickly—I wouldn't have been surprised if you slammed the door in my face and told me to go to—"

"You've been there already," said Natalie, moving forward and touching her fingers to his lips, to keep the word from escaping. "And you're right—you left without a word. Just a letter of resignation. I

kept hoping that maybe you'd call, maybe you'd find a way to get me a message."

He caught her fingers with his hand and raised them to his lips again. "Too risky. He was watching you. If he thought I was even making a move to contact you, you would have been in danger."

That was one of the excuses she'd made for him—that damnable chivalry, the need to keep her safe. One among hundreds that had kept her heart from centering on the hate, the anger at his having left her so abruptly.

"I want you to come with me."

The words were quiet and sudden, his eyes very blue and very intense. "It won't be easy. It's harder than I thought. I have no right to ask—"

"No," she said quickly, again pulling out of his embrace, "you have a right to ask. And there are a lot of things I need to know. How it happened. Where it happened. Who—?"

"Those can wait. He'll be back the day after tomorrow, although he may suspect Janette . . . which means he'll arrive tomorrow night. I'll have to be gone by then."

"Gone." The word stuck in her throat. Natalie raised her hand to the neckline of her sweatshirt and, oddly enough, realized how messy she must seem. "You want me to go with you?"

"No." When she started at the word, he moved toward her and took her hands again. "I want you to stay here. I want you to act as if you haven't seen me—"

"Oh, that should be a breeze."

There was a quirk in his smile—how she'd missed that! Nick shook his head slightly. "Make a show of being dissatisfied, of moving on. Make arrangements to see Sarah, take a trip, something like that."

"And?" Her heart skipped a beat as she looked up into his eyes.

"You'll need to die."

She wasn't certain that her heart was going to start again. But it did as soon as his words began to make sense. "Fake my death. Leave enough behind to make it look like an accident."

"He's not easy to fool," warned Nick softly. "But if he thinks you're dead, it will buy both of us some time."

Natalie looked over her shoulder, at the apartment around her. Leave . . . everything?

But what there really to leave? Freeze-dried dinners and notes taped to her window? Falling asleep in front of the television? Watching for LaCroix—now that she knew that he was watching her—and waiting for the other shoe to drop?

“It’s so much to ask. I can’t offer you much, I know. I should never have come here. I should leave—”

Leave?

Natalie looked back at him quickly, then realized that he saw her hesitation as a negative. In response, she placed her arms around him and kissed him. For a moment there was only that—warmth to warmth—but then she pulled away, before it could lead to anything further.

Because he *would* have to leave. If only for a little while.

Smiling, Nick rubbed his lips with the back of his hand almost absently. “Can I take that as a yes?”

“You can take that however the hell you want,” she told him, managing a deep breath as she looked around the room. Her gaze rested lightly on Sydney and she saddened for a moment at the thought of leaving him behind, but there’d be time for good-bye. Arranging her own death shouldn’t be *too* much of a problem. She’d just have to make certain no one else was involved. If Nick was right, LaCroix would leave no stone unturned

Finding herself wincing at even the thought of the name, Natalie shook her head. “Four weeks.”

“That long?”

Nick’s disappointment was almost charming. She clapped him on the arm as she passed. “That’s how long a solid cover-up will take, Tiger. Think you can manage by yourself for four more weeks?”

“After eight years?” Before she could get away from him, he’d caught her shoulder, his hand tangling in her hair. Nick drew her closer. “The last four have been the worst. Knowing that I could be with you, *should* be with you”

“Lots of cold showers?”

“You should have seen the water bill.”

“Speaking of bills—”

Nick touched his lips to hers briefly, drawing her closer. “Later,” he whispered. “We don’t have much time before I have to go.”

“But you *do* have to go.” Again, Natalie pushed him away, strengthening her resolve against the all too solid warmth of him. A step, another more, and she’d placed a little distance between them.

It seemed so cruel, but she knew that it wasn’t yet time. When they were safe . . . or safer. She doubted they’d ever really be *safe*.

He’d never taken rejection well. Her lips half-parted as he looked down to the floor and away and in that instant she thought about throwing caution to the winds and be damned.

But what happened if he went away this time . . . and never came back? What happened if Janette had a change of heart or LaCroix found him or the Enforcers—

No. She couldn’t give in. Not now.

So she placed a hand against his chest, and kissed him lightly, and let him enfold her in his arms. It was enough just to stand there, having him hold her. “Do you need anything?” she asked. “Can I get you something?”

“To eat?” he teased, then planted a kiss on top of her head and released her. “No. I’m all right. I should be going.”

She caught the furtive glance at the window and wondered, for a moment, whether Janette had been witness to their reunion. But she pushed that speculation from her mind as he headed toward the door. Natalie hurried after him, her breath catching in her throat. “Nick—?”

He turned and it took all her will not to run into his arms. But she stood her ground, forced her hands down to her side, and managed a very soft, “Be careful.”

“You, too.” He hesitated a moment longer, started to say something else . . . but stopped himself. “Later,” he promised.

“Later.”

Natalie followed his steps to the door only after it had closed behind him. She leaned against the wood, felt it real and hard and solid beneath her fingers, and wondered if it had been a dream. But the scent of his aftershave still lingered. As she closed her eyes and

sniffed, she could feel his arms around her again, his lips against hers. Nick had come back to her.

And for the first time in a long time, she felt warm.

Ships in the Night

Ships 7 – Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow

The 'info-mation' shows segued into sitcoms during which laugh-tracks tried to make worn and weary jokes seem new, and dramas about people whose lives were as cardboard as the inserts in the gloves she'd unpacked this morning . . . and just as uninteresting. It was when the news began again, recapping the events of the world since early evening, that she began to think about sleeping.

Not that she hadn't dozed through the evening's 'entertainment'—she was used to living off cat-naps. But she was always awake for the late-night world news. In case

It was *always* in case, wasn't it? In case one of Nick's brethren decided to finally out him/herself to the world and say, "Yes, Virginia, there *are* vampires, wanna see my fangs?" In case there should be some amazing announcement of a cure, some new miracle drug that might be applied to more than molting sheep or the agonized victims of cholera. In case she should be watching the events of the world unfold and catch a glimpse out of the corner of the camera lens of blond hair, a stunning smile, those blue eyes

Let him be safe. Please, God, let him still be safe.

The news had finished. There had been no sight of him. Another glance at the window, at the sign that she could vaguely read, backwards, as she turned off the lights and the gleam from the moon outside shone through the paper and the glass. Natalie reached down to brush her hand against Sydney's fur as she made her way to the bedroom. To sleep.

And to dream.

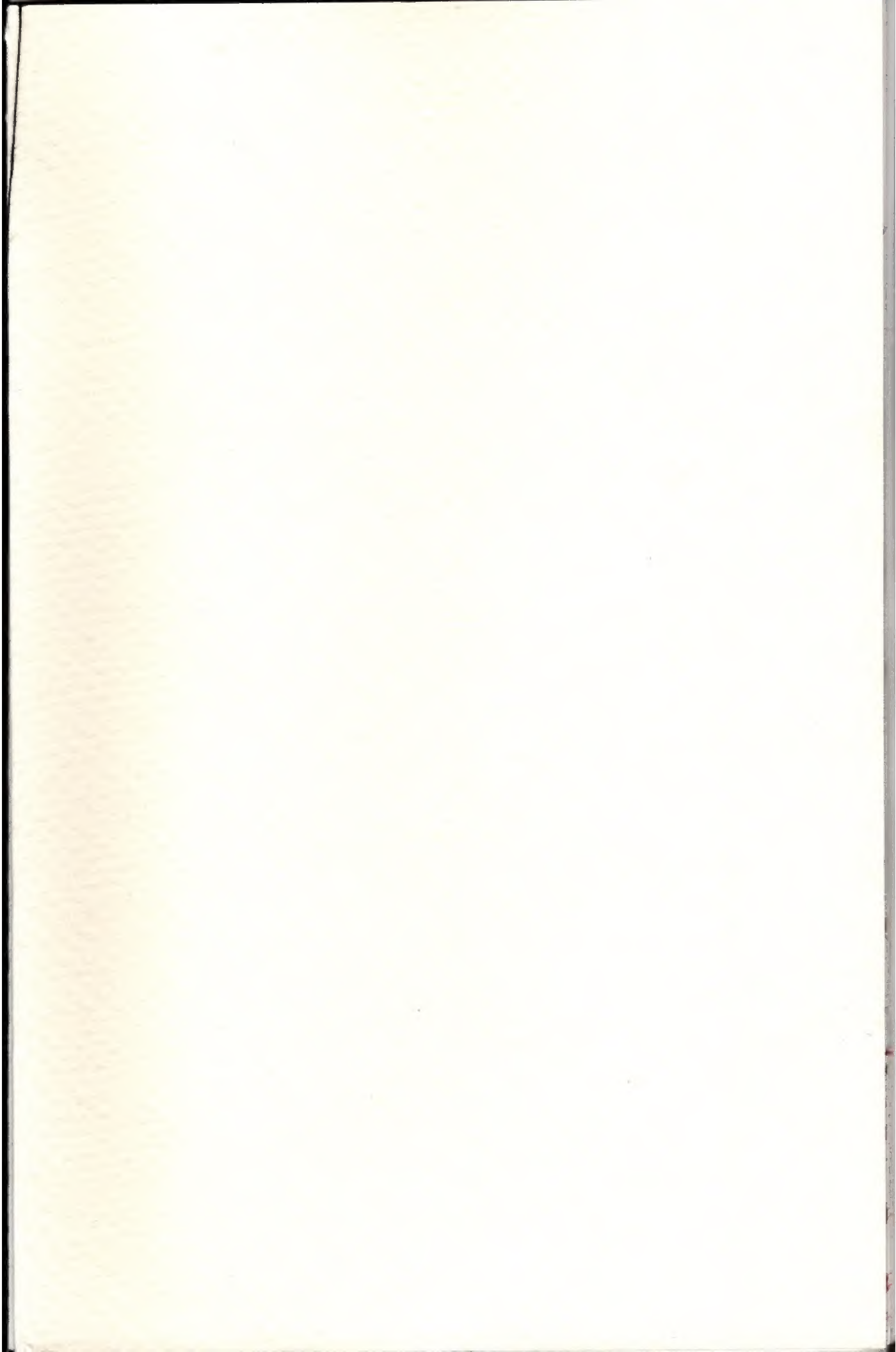
What more was left to her? Only that. He hadn't given her a choice.

But she could still dream. Until sunshine would awaken her again, to a cup of coffee and Sydney's plaintive cries for food. Sometime

during the morning ritual of getting dressed for work, she'd wander by the window and take down the sign, glancing briefly at the 'Welcome home,' before crumpling it in her fist and tossing it into the wastepaper basket by her desk—she'd have to empty that soon, it was filled near to overflowing. Another wastebasket filled. Another few weeks. Another few months. Another few years

And tonight, when she walked to her car, she knew she'd feel the eyes on her again. Just as she knew she'd heat another dinner, put up another note, watch more insipid television programs until the evening news disappointed her again, go to sleep and dream . . . just as she'd done since he'd left. Over and over and over again. Until

Until there would be days when she didn't think about him.
Even once.





Ships in the

Ships 7 - Tomorrow

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Ships in the Night

Ships 0 - Prologue

There were days when she didn't even think about him was pushing it. At least she told herself. Hours, maybe that then, something brought him to mind. He honest that every now that the time from a corpse she was autopsying. a joke overheard better not to think about it. Because there were enough things that brought him to mind. And no matter how many ways she found to keep herself busy, a movie on late-night TV that she'd of him. That he'd been there, once.

And wasn't there any more, once. That's why Natalie's breath caught in her throat as she walked to her car. She stopped, aware of the light breeze of the spring evening felt brave enough to walk as she hurried to her car. Once there, Natalie it could have been a memory. Another wisp of cologne on the breeze. But she still felt the eyes on her, watching her.

Ships in the Night

A Nat-Pack Party Fave
May 1995